

Sermon preached at St Stephen's

9 August 2015

Readings: Ephesians 4:25–5:2

John 6:35, 41–51

**I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;**

Lists from Paul or Paul's devout disciple. That seems to be the last thing we want in today's world. Especially lists about behaviour. It is as if there is some ideal way of being a community following Jesus. Perhaps that's the problem. Ideals exist in our minds as some sort of check. Are we doing it right? However, each of us, and each community probably has a different ideal. If there is an ideal church what does it look like? And if there is an ideal church, there is probably an ideal minister who does everything that makes that church prosper and succeed. Then we transfer that to the reality we are now living in. If it doesn't match that unspoken, unseen ideal, then what? Do we all have to struggle to make the ideal our reality all the more? But what if that's not our task, what if our task is not to be ideal, but rather to be who we are where we are faithfully following the call of Jesus on our lives, what then?

So let's explore this reading! The writer of Ephesians wants his hearers to make the connections between the new relationship they have with Christ, with each other, on the one hand, and real living, concrete behaviour, on the other. It is important to see both aspects, otherwise a passage like this can turn into a set of rules. They are more than that. They assume a new state of being which makes such changes possible. If we concentrate only on the new state of being and expect changes, we are being naive. There is often a big time lag between inner change and outer change and for some people it lasts an eternity! We need help to make the connections, for they frame the way we are in community.

The instructions begin: Speaking the truth gets a new basis: we are each other's limbs. We need each other! Deliberate lying is much easier to avoid than giving false messages and representing oneself falsely. Many people struggle even to know their own truth; manipulation and self deceit have at some stage been the coping mechanism and then formed a habit of life. You need a lot of love to let go playing games and projecting false images of yourself.

Get angry, but don't sin. Set aside bitterness, temper, anger, rage. It is not wrong to feel anger, any more than it is wrong to feel appetite, whether sexual or in relation to food. Most times anger is usually a second feeling, preceded by pain, hurt, grief or the like. When we realise that we can better understand our anger. But anger treated in any other way, such as released uncontrolled or buried or allowed to build up or fester, is destructive both for the ourselves and for others. Anger gets transferred to others, sometimes immediately, sometimes after long periods of build up until it is explosive and out of proportion. Or it gets swallowed, even forgotten, and we live in a state of self-directed anger, a recipe for depression and a form of self harm. Not letting the sun go down on one's anger is about dealing with anger: truthfully with ourselves and truthfully with others, but not destructively. It is worth opening up these issues because there is still much in Christianity which leads people to believe that Christian peace means lying about anger and hurt by always being 'nice'. Giving place to the devil is a stern warning that phoney treatment of anger and conflict sets us going in exactly the opposite direction to God and to love.

The warning about theft seems quite uncontroversial, until we realise that it is pitting theft against generosity towards people in need. There is no middle position called goodness. There is only love or theft. Incorporation into the body of Christ is incorporation into a body that is bent on filling the world with love and compassion. Our engagement in theft as a middle class is so much more subtle and complex that we prefer to describe it in terms which obscure the need of the two-thirds world of have nots and of those disadvantaged within our own community. We need help to stop being thieves.

Compassion, generosity, goodness need to become our way of life and the foundation of that is God's grace and generosity towards us. Grieving the Spirit means disappointing the Spirit. The Spirit is disappointed when we opt for the alternative way of life. Elsewhere we read of quenching the Spirit. It is the same idea: don't block the Spirit in your life. The Spirit wants to bear the fruits of love in you and

through you. Fundamental to all of this is forgiveness. It means giving, not holding oneself back and holding something against people. Let it go, embrace them; God embraced us.

The foundation for all of these practical exhortations comes through clearly. Not only should we imitate God - what a thought! We should also be absolutely clear about what most characterises God: love! Otherwise our imitation could end up being a disaster! The author points us to Christ's life and death. A life poured out in love is better than all the elaborate rituals of sacrifice and sweeter than all the finest incense. It becomes a form of holiness open to all - living in love which informs both our own sense of identity as individuals and together and gives us our common goal and meaning in life.

So how do we get the strength to do this? Where do we get fed? How? The hunger for an experience of a holy presence is leading people all over the place. Crystals and channellers, pop-sacred writers, all claim to put us in contact with that presence we desire. Even some traditional Christian sources are now being re-discovered and re-worked to accommodate this quest. And then there's all the ones who have never darkened the door of a church, or would never consider themselves "religious," who are suddenly convinced that there is a host of angelic beings camped around them or hovering about them, one Above all the New Age formulas, above all the angels, and before all the mystics, there is Jesus Christ himself. Jesus said he would be not some fleeting, momentary, ecstatic experience we might encounter once in our lifetime if we were sufficiently skilled in meditation practices. This week's gospel declares that Jesus promised to be a daily-bread presence for all who trust in him. Jesus' holy presence is to sustain us and nourish us each day - providing a sense of wholeness, of fullness, of entire satisfaction. The problem for postmodern seekers is not finding something to believe in, but discovering what are the "marks" of a true daily bread presence. How do we know when we've been visited by the divine?

A Daily-Bread presence is life-giving - Jesus called himself something common, ordinary, accessible - he is our bread, our food, our constant source of daily spiritual nourishment. Our bodies must be fed every day to keep them physically able. Our spiritual body must also be nurtured and renewed every day to keep us sustained spiritually. The life that Jesus' daily-bread presence promises is much more than mere ongoing existence. It is the gift of life in all its fullness which we receive from Christ, the promise of full participation in the presence of God.

A Daily-Bread presence is intimate - Our culture loves to be casual, informal, hands-on. Part of the reason fast food restaurants do so well is that they encourage us to come "as we are" (wearing jeans and T-shirts and gym shoes) and they encourage us to eat our food with our fingers. Daily bread is like that - it is finger food for the soul. We can come close to the presence of Jesus; we can share a comfortable and comforting intimacy with that daily-bread kind of presence.

A Daily-Bread presence is mysterious - The power that can offer us life in all its fullness and put us in touch with God the Creator is beyond our understanding. There is a mountain-top as well as a table-top quality to the divine presence. But perhaps the greatest mystery surrounding the daily-bread presence we receive from Jesus is the element of grace that brings it to our table in the first place. This is the mystery to which John's text keeps returning. To experience manifestations of transcendence Jesus says all we have to do is trust. But that very trust is itself a mysterious gift of grace - a manifestation of God's presence already at work within our lives.

Living with that kind of presence in our lives allows us to ground our daily style of living that Ephesians described in the love of Christ. A Daily-Bread presence that takes us beyond ourselves, that connects us with our deepest self and gives life in all its fullness feeds us beyond all we can imagine. Moreover, it invites us to be a daily-bread presence ourselves. Are our dealings with our neighbours life giving? Are they of that intimate nature that demonstrates not only the love of God but our love too? Do we demonstrate the mystery of God's gracious love through our own graciousness?

Embrace them; God embraced us. Feed them; God fed us. That's the simple message of this meal we share month by month, and by the meals we share in our homes with others. Can we be that daily-bread presence?

The Word of Jesus is among us. Hear that Word.